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***Masks and metamorphoses, dreams and illusions in Mercè Rodoreda's "Carnaval"***  
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**Catalan Review, Vol. VII, number 1 (1993), p. 71-77**

MASKS AND METAMORPHOSES, DREAMS  
AND ILLUSIONS IN MERCÈ RODOREDA'S  
«CARNAVAL»

KATHLEEN MCNERNEY

In a letter to Anna Murià dated July 1946 and sent from Bordeaux, Mercè Rodoreda enthusiastically explains some of her writing projects. First she says that since she doesn't have time to write a novel at the moment, she will dedicate herself to short stories; moreover, she has discovered that the story is a great genre. She plans to write some fifty tales, of which she claims she has already done half. One of the cycles of stories was to be called «Carnaval,» and she gives the plot line of the only one she has finished, called «Rua,» rather succinctly:

És una noia que fuig d'un ball, en un xalet de l'Avinguda del Tibidabo a la una de la nit. Troba un xicot —tots dos van disfressats i tenen divuit anys— i l'acompanya fins a casa seva. Ella viu a Consell de Cent. A la Plaça Molina els surten dos lladres i els deixen sense «un sou». El Passeig de Gràcia és ple de paperets i pengent serpentina dels arbres i els balcons. La Rua ha passat i ells també. I ja està.<sup>1</sup>

This rich story was actually published with the title «Carnaval» in the collection *Vint-i-dos contes* in 1958, and as far as we know, unless Carme Arnau has found something new, the other spinoffs Rodoreda describes in that letter —the robbers in the police station, a little boy who thinks his mask makes him invisible, a couple making love in a restaurant, her disguised as Pompadour, him as Casanova, the life of the dog that follows the protagonist of «Carnaval»— were never written on perhaps were lost in the turmoil of postwar France.

<sup>1</sup> *Cartes a l'Anna Murià 1939-1956* (Barcelona: La Sal, 1985), 76-77.

Rodoreda's description of the story we do have from that group is certainly accurate enough, but it gives no notion of the qualities that make «Carnaval» as magical as a masked ball or a midsummer night's dream. The omniscient narrator never gives a name to the female protagonist, other than Titania, the Queen of the Fairies, which is her disguise. This figure goes back further than Shakespeare —she is the Great Goddess who ruled the pantheon of Aegean «Titans» or Elder Gods, later Ovid's Diana, then the medieval Fairy Queen.<sup>2</sup> After Shakespeare, she also appears in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* which itself becomes the opera *Mignon* in which Titania is a character played by an actress, as well as in the opera *Oberon*, named for Titania's husband, the king of the Fairies.

The reference to Shakespeare in the story, though, is made clear by a remark Titania makes about her own costume. After she shouts the name Titania in a square to compare echoing possibilities with those of another plaza, her companion asks:

—Així és la reina de les fades que tinc el gust d'acompanyar?

—Oh, per pura casualitat. Amb el mateix vestit i un ret de perles, podia haver estat Julieta. O bé, amb flors i fulles als cabells —afegí amb coqueteria—, Ofèlia. Però, és clar, d'acord amb el meu caràcter he preferit de ser, si més no per una sola nit, un personatge ple de poder.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to placing the costume in a Shakesperian context, the statement suggests a certain facility of transformation or transfiguration, which becomes a key element in the story, just as it is in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, certainly very appropriate to a story about Mardi Gras. However, Shakespeare's Titania is not as powerful as this young Catalan Titania might wish. While the mythological Titania of the Greeks certainly wielded power and many later

<sup>2</sup> See Barbara G. Wlaker, *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols & Sacred Objects* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988) for information and research about this and mythology in general from a feminist perspective.

<sup>3</sup> This quotation is from *Tots els contes* (Barcelona: Edicions 62 i «la Caixa», 1983), 66. All other citations are from the same edition.



fairies had strong magical abilities, which led them to be associated with witches, Shakespeare's version falls clearly within the post-matriarchal, or patriarchal, era. Here, Oberon is in charge: with Puck's help, he puts a magic potion into Titania's eyes to make her fall in love with the next being she sees, and then makes sure the being is an ass. That is, Bottom is really a weaver who is to play the role of Pyramus in a play, but he becomes a monster when he is given the head of an ass. With whom, then, is the enchanted Titania in love? A weaver who's not an ass, an unlikely actor certainly not to be type-cast as Pyramus. In fact, Theseus picks this troupe precisely because they are such simpletons that he hopes to have a merry evening in spite of the tragic outcome of the play to be performed.

Rodoreda's Titania is more enchanting than enchanted, and she does exercise a certain power over the sometimes fascinated Pere. His disguise makes him a Jewish tailor of the Louis XV period: a cardboard nose with mustache, great cardboard scissors, and very tight pants which get ripped during the course of the evening, to his great chagrin, since they are rented. He complains that his mask laughable, to which she responds: «Peró, si una careta no fes riure, potser valdria més anar amb la cara de debò» (65). Indeed, more interesting than his «careta» are a series of «carotas,» for Pere's emotions change quickly, and he often tries to cover up his real feelings, putting a «good face» on things, so to speak. When he doesn't know what to say, for example, he is «decidit a donar a la seva mirada un aire de sorpresa intel·ligent, admirativa» (65). With a «somriure forçat» (65), he confesses he is carrying pastries for his little brother. While waiting for her, he feels «una mica desplaçat, una mica fora del món» (65). The conversation about the perfume of gardenias make him feel anguish, then fear. Having gathered the flowers and torn his pants, «amb prou feines havia pogut dominar un flux d'irritació sobrada» (68). He feels «esverat» (70), «desconcertat» (71), «deprimit» and impatient (73). His frustration at the encounter with the robbers leaves him crying, with «una nosa a la gola» (75) and «la mirada fosca» (76). There are those contrapuntal feelings, too,

however, that keep him going almost in spite of himself: he's ready to accompany the young lady, not only across the city but to the ends of the earth, and it seems to him that he has been enchanted. When her door closes with a dry, metallic click, and he is returned to «la nit, al carrer, a la seva realitat més nua,» he says to himself: «M'he enamorat con un boig» (81).

There are other metaphorical transformations throughout the story: since the two have to go downhill, towards the sea, they must be water, the fairy queen laughs. She tells Pere that her lover compares her to a flower, but this affirmation comes into question later when she exchanges this version of her life story for another. Her gauzy long cape flutters in the wind, making her look like a bird; she also shakes the rainwater off her cape like a bird. Pere, too becomes a bird in less lyrical circumstances —the thieves call himna «pardalet,» and add: «Que et duia cuquets, la mareta?» (74). Pere thinks his companion looks like an angel, just as charmed as was Shakespeare's Titani a when she awoke to see Bottom, her weaver-turned-ass, only to utter the words: «What angel wakes me from my flowery bed?»<sup>4</sup>

Another level of the multiple masquerades in this truly enchanting story are the variant versions the two characters give of their respective lives. After consuming the purloined bottle of champagne, and the pastries intended for Pere's little brother, she explains that she left the party because it was at the home of her lover, and his wife had inconsiderately decided to show up, making her feel uncomfortable. But even within this explanation she undercuts her own story as she ends it, saying that her lover said: «I al cap d'una estona m'ha dit... "T'estimaré eternament" o una cosa per l'estil» (67). It's hardly a formula by which to remember a lover's eternal promise, and in fact it brings to mind the often repeated similar phrases in the chronicles and in *Tirant lo Blanc* as a narrative device to insist on the veracity of what is being said.<sup>5</sup> She also feigns a fainting

<sup>4</sup> *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (London: Spring Books, 1966), 147. The other quotation is from the same edition.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion, of this early Renaissance Technique, see my *Tirant lo Blanc*



spell attributed to her weak heart, but a bit later she gives a new version of her life, much more prosaic. She's never had a lover, she's going to Paris because her parents are moving there, temporarily, and then they will go to a small village where she will end up marrying someone like her father, and the real reason she left the party is that she is jealous of her brother's fiancée. She is so unhappy about losing that brother, who will stay on in Barcelona with his new wife, that Pere wishes only to be transformed into that brother. Nor does she have heart trouble.

Likewise, Pere has invented a life for himself. He studies Greek, writes poems, and a book to be called «El somriure de Proserpina,» a reference to the underworld which seems somehow appropriate to themes and characters in the story. When he finishes his studies, Pere explains, he'll travel, maybe working as a stoker on a ship. Most striking is his ideal way of dying, in contrast with the usual practices:

Els poetes d'ací solem morir al llit amb tota la família al voltant i després els diaris comenten el darrer mot i la força del darrer sospir. I endavant amb la història. Jo voldria morir ben sol, amb les sabates posades, de panxa a terra, travessat per una fletxa» (70).

But after the run-in with the thieves, the truth comes out: he had to stop studying and start working when his father died and he has no hope of writing verses or travelling now that he is the head of the family—he even has to put on a good face and act cheerful for his mother's sake. He laments, chiding himself for complaining, that his life «podria servir per a fer-ne una novel·la barata» and that sitting there on the bench, «pensava que la vida és ensopida» (78). To which she replies «Coses del Carnaval, no et sembla?» Rodoreda has used this technique of presenting double versions of reality in other stories which always calls into question the reliability of the narrator or protagonist. Another striking example is to be found in this same collection in a story called «Abans de morir,» in which the protagonist

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*Revisited: A Critical Study* (Ann Arbor, MI: Fifteenth-Century Studies, 1983), especially the third chapter, «Fact, Fiction, and Form,» 35-57.

enters one version of an event into her own diary, only to have it contradicted by herself as first-person narrator. The technique is particularly effective in «Carnaval,» where everything is in flux and the only constant is change itself.

A final transformation brings this story in touch with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and at the same time, is typical of Rodoreda. I'm referring to the flowers, some of which have magical powers. Our Catalan Queen of the Fairies smells gardenias, and in a little garden with a low fence, she sees them, or believes she does. Pere, tucking his false scissors in, gallantly jumps the fence to gather them, wraps them in his handkerchief, tearing his pants, and when a dog starts barking at them, they run. Once again, things aren't what they seem: the flowers have no perfume, they're definitely not gardenias, and they're actually a bit mysterious:

De què fan olor? Noe recorda res aquesta mena d'olor? Una olor que gairebé no ho és de tan feble, però em recorda vagament l'olor de les flors de saüquer... Veus? Sense pensar-hi he trobat de què feien olor. I si fossin begònies?

—Són més petites. Vull dir més grosses. És a dir les gardènies són petites.

—Potser són begònies escarransides.

—Deuen ser camèlies. —Tots dos havien entrat de ple en el joc.

—Camèlies? No... Les camèlies les conec d'una hora lluny. Això, en pots estar ben segur, són unes flors misterioses. Flor de nit de carnaval (69).

The flowers, linked with elder by their faint odor, are associated with the queen of the underworld in druidic mythology— it was elder that was used to make witches' travel-brooms.<sup>6</sup> In any case, the blossoms get lost during the evening's adventures, and this marks the passage of time, as Titània feels the simultaneous loss of her eighteen years and her chance to keep an evocative souvenir of that night. This accounts, I think, for the rather suprising announce-

<sup>6</sup> See Walker, *Dictionary*.

ment by the narrator that «[E]lla sí que no es recordaria més d'aquella nit» (79); thus the reader is not given a chance to speculate about memories of the future. The role of carnivals as markers of the passage of time, «the true hero of every feast,» is explored at length by Mikhail Bakhtin, who also points out the importance of the crowning and uncrowning of kings and queens on various feast days as symbolic of cyclical renewals.<sup>7</sup>

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the flowers are associated with fairies, and especially with, spells including loss of memory and a kind of Segismundo confusion between dream and reality. The favorites seem to be varieties of pausies, —from the French ward «pensée» in the sense of fancy, or notion. Referred to in the play as love-in-idleness, they are also known as heartsease, and were thought to cure the discomforts of love. The juices of these plants are put on the eyelids of Queen Titania, and some of the mortal characters as well, to make them fall in love with the first being they see. When released from the spell with another herb, the victim has only vague memories of the events, which are recalled as if from a dream. And speaking of dreams, I'd like to use Puck's final disclaimer as my own:

If we shadows have offended,  
Think but this —and all is mended—  
That you have but slumber'd here  
While these visions did appear (158).

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<sup>7</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1968), 219.